Comment: Federal Statistical Coordination

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PROFESSOR JAMES T. BONNEN AND SEVERAL COMMENTATORS (Feinberg 1983; Slater 1983; DeMuth 1983) on an earlier version of his work raise and commingle, as I see it, a number of separable themes that it may be helpful to disaggregate for purposes of discussion. Their views well reflect the typical Washington stew, in the sense of a heterogeneous mixture of complaints and aspirations concerning structure of government, funding and allocations, personnel, and substantive policies.

Major Themes and Messages

1. The declared central concern is the reestablishment of federal statistical coordination, which is stated at the outset to be dead. It is unlikely that federal statistical coordination, as Professor Bonnen recognizes, ever lived, although the specification of an attainable higher standard of performance for federal statistics is welcome. (I return to the central issue of the meaning of practical coordination in a later section of this commentary.)

2. The reduction in the funds appropriated for federal statistics is

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a recurrent refrain, a cut estimated to be 20 percent in real resources in the fiscal years 1981–1983. But strong complaints are legion against budget and appropriation down-sizing of programs regarded as worthwhile or effective. I have, like others, my own list of complaints over statistical series that have been eliminated or changed so as to affect comparability or the quality and reliability of their use in my own work. The elimination of work-stoppage series for government employees and the counting of stoppages involving only a thousand or more employees in the private sector, for me, are irritating illustrations. But the means of restitution of funding do not lie in the arguments of professional statisticians but are more likely crassly related to mobilizing users of the data.

3. The concern at times is with the failure to achieve a recommended organization "to do a good job of central coordination of statistical policy" of 200 or 40 or even 15 positions as a separate office in the executive office of the president. The aspiration is also for an office in each cabinet department, of 10 to 12 positions, to coordinate the statistical policy activities of the department.

4. The elimination of the position of the chief statistician, and the appointment of someone less than a distinguished statistician on June 20, 1983, is responded to as a denigration of the profession; the pride and status of statisticians is at stake. Similarly, the abolition of the statistical policy branch in the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is seen as symptomatic of a downgrading of the central statistical function and is regarded as a reduction in the capacity to influence statistical activities of federal agencies. Indeed, dealing with vital issues of statistical policy under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 is inherently demeaning.

5. The paper was originally proposed to "heighten the awareness of our colleagues, of Congress, and of the general public on the importance of this issue" (Wallman 1983). At times Professor Bonnen's paper also gives the impression of a political polemic. In the Washington scene, and by its mores, the author has entered the political lists, an arena for jousting at the onset of the political season.

So the arguments are concerned with money, organizational aspirations, professional status, political polemics, and the objective of federal statistical coordination, all from the perspective of statisticians, largely from the academic side of the profession.

Organizational Structure Issues

Some countries have highly centralized departments of statistics and others, like the United States, are decentralized among many federal agencies and among local, state, and federal levels of government as well as sharing responsibilities for some aggregations and series with private-sector organizations. In our country, federal statistical coordination, whatever that may mean and by what various means it may be achieved, is accordingly a requisite objective.

I would have thought that such a general objective at the outset would be widely accepted and that details of structure and program could be generally mediated among users, congressional committees, federal statistical agencies, both large and small, and the executive office by the administration and professional statisticians. But structure and content of coordination cannot be successfully and operationally decreed or even legislated by anyone, particularly statisticians. Like all Washington problems, this area has large political components, in several senses of the term, and must be fundamentally approached as such, recognizing that there are technical components.

A few comments on the structure proposals may help to convey the fundaments of the preceding paragraph:

- I would not be comfortable with the proposal for a staff in the secretary's office (suggested to be 10 to 12) to coordinate the department's statistical policy activities, particularly in departments with major statistical units such as the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). That would initiate pitched battles with existing units; it would in part duplicate functions now performed in program budgeting or through special task forces, and it would create endless opportunities for games with OMB and congressional committees.
- The proposal to remove an office of federal statistical coordination from the main line of OMB genuinely surprises me, although separation from an office of regulatory policy, the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in OMB, appears sensible in view of divergent purposes and the need for such different personnel. But new legislation would be required. Statistical standards or coordination cannot be achieved in Washington without the direct backing of budget examiners who can influence in detail the flow

of funds for one purpose or another and reduce duplication. The decisions and details need to be influenced at the examiner level; they are too specialized to be shaped at higher levels. The fiat of a chief statistician is not likely to accomplish much as against the interests of separate agencies, users, and congressional requests. A close relation between a statistical coordination office and budget examiners assigned to agencies is essential for serious coordination.

- Professor Bonnen is correct in perceiving that executive performance in an area and special, focused congressional oversight should be closely linked. That is easier said than done. The political muscle to achieve these results is rather with the users of data, with whom some compromises will need to be made about structure and coordination.

Federal Statistical Coordination

The issues of federal statistical coordination are genuinely important and they are likely to be even more important in the future as the volume of data in private and public organizations grows, and questions of quality become more insistent. But statistical coordination is not necessarily central coordination and certainly is not direction. (We have the same sort of a problem in the discussion of industrial policy today.) Major statistical agencies have always engaged in direct negotiations and will continue to do so, e.g., the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Extended discussions take place between users and agencies over issues affecting quality. Congressional concerns from constituents, interest groups, and local and state governments also have a direct impact on the process. Thus, statistical coordination must be much more broadly viewed than as a technical matter or an issue of simple location of function in the federal executive.

There is, however, a range of vital and professional issues affecting the quality of statistical information and the purposes for which they may be used that need urgent attention. Many of these problems affect my own work and that of colleagues as academicians or practitioners. In view of the backlog of questions, some of the most urgent priorities would need to be established. From his wide knowledge, Professor Bonnen could advance the cause of quality statistics by indicating the priorities he would establish, other than the eleven

items he uses to define "central coordination of statistical policy." My own untutored priorities would include: limits on data that affect confidentiality; a review of the concepts of occupations and industries; publication standards; and the division between state and federal data in a number of series, in addition to some research into applicable statistical methods and data handling.

I would readily support a modest unit of professionals with distinguished leadership within OMB to perform such functions provided that it is well understood that results cannot be achieved by fiat, and that the opportunities for constructive coordination depend upon working together and working out the numerous compromises necessary to create results. Any other approach will not work in this world.

References

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